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CIA Watchdog? Trimble Differs With Fulbright

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The latest Congressional move to bring the Central Intelligence Agency to heel is apparently destined, like all its predecessors, for failure, but it revives a number of intriguing points.

This attempt involves two Arkansans, neither intimately. Representative James W. Trimble of Berryville is a member of the House Rules Committee which is currently considering legislation designed to tighten Congressional control over the supersecret agency. Senator J. William Fulbright is involved by association merely because he has long been a critic of CIA aloofness and sacrosanctity.

Trimble and Fulbright disagree in the affair at hand. The basic issue is whether or not Congress will have a more direct hand in guiding the affairs of the CIA, as it does every other government agency. Genuine legislative concern over the problem is intermingled, as usual, with elements of ax-grinding, politics and pride. And there are two fairly well defined schools of thought.

19 Resolutions

No less than 19 identical resolutions have been introduced in the House and are now before the Rules Committee for consideration. They all would create a Joint Congressional Committee on Intelligence, composed of nine House members and nine senators, to oversee the operations of the CIA and all other federal intelligence agencies.

Most of the proponents have already testified on behalf of the joint committee idea. The opponents have yet to be heard and while the hearings are in recess, the best information is the resolutions have been quietly consigned to the Rules Committee's crowded graveyard of objectionable legislation. A formal decision on the matter is regarded as a futile gesture since a majority of the committee reportedly is against the resolutions.

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How Answerable?

The proponents, whose number includes Fulbright, have repeatedly argued that the CIA is not sufficiently answerable to Congress under present circumstances, and is therefore too free to "get away" with too many things like making and carrying out foreign policy, all behind an indignant cloak of secrecy.

They point to the agency's well-known mistakes such as the Bay of Pigs fiasco and some less cut and dried South Vietnam activity. They carp that the CIA too often overruns the confines of its intelligence-gathering framework, and summarize that its whole concept and image is undemocratic anyway.

Fulbright has been silent this time, but two years ago he went so far as to vote against Senate confirmation of John McCone as President Kennedy's choice to head the CIA. Fulbright was not opposed to McCone but felt that the Foreign Relations Committee which he heads, should have had a chance to examine the prospective director of an agency that in effect makes foreign policy.

Several years prior to that, Fulbright introduced his own version of a bill that would have given Congress a closer check on the CIA. It has long mouldered in its early grave.

Opponents of any further Congressional inroads into the CIA sanctum are mostly those lawmakers who already have access to its every secret. They are those ranking members of the Armed Services and Appropriations Committees in both houses who sit as special CIA subcommittees to authorize and pass on its operation and financing.

Once the agency wins the approval of these subcommittees, its appropriations are "hidden" in other money bills that reach the floor of both houses. Thus the legislative requirements are satisfied by full Congressional approval of money of the CIA but only the handful on the special subcommittees know what it is for and how much it is.

Insiders Satisfied

These insiders, who always preface their arguments with the explanation that secrecy precludes them from making a full defense, contend that if the United States is going to maintain an espionage apparatus, its very nature demands that it be cloaked. Besides, they say, they are fully satisfied that the CIA is doing a good job and their colleagues should take their word for it.

And only last week the top U. S. official with a hand in CIA policy matters gave assurances that the agency does not operate independently and is strictly subject to executive control. His inference was if the CIA gets in hot water, it was sent in.

Underlying the Congressional flap are the personal feelings of those involved. Proponents of a joint watchdog committee are miffed not only by what they regard as the CIA's untouchable attitude but also because they are not privy to such intriguing business. On the other hand, those who are privy are somewhat jealous of their prerogative.

Trimble, who belongs really to neither school, comes closest probably to the dispassionate approach.

"I don't see very much need for this (joint committee) bill," he says. "The CIA has to be a secret organization if it is going to function. The more people you let in on its operations, the less secret it is. We might just as well not have it if everybody gets to poke around its operations."